



Public Service Broadcasting
in the Learning Age

where now for the BBC?

Prof. Stephen Heppell
Leonie Ramondt
Pete Bradshaw

Ultralab, October 2004

Introduction

These are challenging times for Public Service Broadcasting and even more so for the provision of learning within PSB. Strategies and approaches that have served the BBC well historically will not cope with the onslaught of new learning opportunities and entitlements that will characterise lifelong learning in the UK during this new millennium, nor will they cope with the quite remarkable changes wrought by technology that will at the least redefine the nature of broadcasting, but more likely will radically transform the landscape of PSB provision in a way that will be unrecognisable in less than a decade.

As if this double edged sword of radical new learning and transformational emergent technologies was not enough to deal with, whole swathes of assumptions about our social, political, geographical and economic lives are changing too, also largely as a result of those new technologies and the new empowerment that new learning brings. Geographical boundaries have softened, a job for life has disappeared, the family is being redefined, representative democracy is struggling. Our learning systems seek to arm us to be ingenious parents, workers, citizens, or just plain curious and effective learners, in this new world, just as they armed us to be conforming parents, compliant voters and productive workers in the one that preceded it. In both cases there are aggregate social and economic imperatives driving and shaping learning.

It would not be surprising in the face of this certainty of uncertainty about learning and PSB futures if the BBC were to entrench into a seemingly safe reactive role, waiting to see what might happen before trying to offer a service, as best it can, in support. But these currents of change are the products of organisations and of policies. It would be a betrayal of its history if the BBC were not to grasp a central proactive role in guiding, directing and shaping these possible learning futures. Those futures must be inclusive and philosophically consistent. Public Service Broadcasting, if it means anything at all, means no learner cut adrift, or left behind.

...and fulfilling that proactive, innovative, guiding & leading, public service role in the 21st century, will be enough of a task to fully occupy the BBC beyond all our lifetimes. But it will require some radical new approaches with parts of the corporation being empowered to be far braver than has been the case before.

Pedagogic drivers

The world of learning is changing, propelled by some powerful drivers. Inevitably, public service broadcasting's role within that learning world is changing too, but are those changes congruent with tomorrow's learning? are the paces of change matched? Can PSB keep up with. or indeed lead, those changes? Should PSB be reactive or proactive in this process of change? Is there one learning future, or many? First, of course, it is important to understand some of the currents and tides of educational change in the 21st century:

Arguably, the post war baby boom redefined pedagogy for a generation as systems and structures struggled to cope with a huge growth in numbers. The "productivity" model of learning that emerged placed standard learners in a standard, stratified curriculum with relatively large class sizes, housed by a flurry of temporary and demountable accommodation. Within that post war period the school as an institution was at the very heart of learning and has remained there until now. Both the temporary accommodation and the pedagogy remained in place for rather longer than was intended. Emphasis was on the transmission of knowledge, the curriculum was "delivered" and the mixed age vertical pastoral structures of the pre war years were rapidly replaced by the administrative convenience of horizontal year groups. A tightly stratified population of learners, within an institutional habit of teaching "from the

front" was a relatively easy target for PSB's learning focus. Commission for a specific age, broadcast to a whole class of viewers and... job done.

With a surplus of post war baby-boom children, wasting a few didn't seem to matter and many were discarded in pursuit of the excellence of a few, but recently this has changed rapidly: by 1997 the UK had more postgraduate students than there were undergrads in the early 60s and growing participation rates in learning became a target. The first "A" level exams were aimed at the "top 10%" of students, but by 1995 44% under 21 had attained 2 "A" level passes. The 2000 target was 60%, and rightly so, with a very achievable 50% participation rate in HE as a current target. At the beginning of that era the "production line" or perhaps "typing pool" characterised employment, with a "job for life" seen as an aspirational lifestyle choice. This was the passive TV era of the couch potato and "Are you sitting comfortably" at home or or "Singing Together" in schools.

But that was in the last millennium. Today, the old jobs are relocated overseas. Children, as a declining proportion of the total population, are much more scarce, the policy position is approaching that of not wasting a single learner and the rhetoric is characterised by "Every Child Matters", it is about inclusion and about minimising the digital divide, quite properly in each case. This has given some excuse to re-examine our existing pedagogy. That opportunity has been taken - for example the Tomlinson Report once again opens a prospect of children proceeding at varying pace in varied parts of the curriculum, with HE spilling down into school and children learning across multiple institutions. At the same time the growth industries, in value terms, in our economy are those that emphasize ingenuity, ambition, creativity, collaborative endeavor and thinking skills. This new agenda of scarce children and a need for new "process" capabilities does not fit comfortably with a curriculum built around individual and private endeavor, recorded through linear notation, with ambition capped by a series of comfortable "criterion referenced" targets based unambitiously on the performance of previous cohorts. An economic push for change is becoming a powerful voice in Europe. Ireland's Enterprise Strategy Group's "Ahead of the Curve" in July 2004 for example explicitly sees the role of learning as building economic continuity and progress from their "tiger economy" boom years.

Inevitably, after such a long period of stability some significant new directions in educational organisation and pedagogy are emerging at school level and learning through PSB must be at least congruent with these new directions, arguably leading some of them. In the UK the boldest schools are questioning all assumptions about organisation and management; "gold standards" in assessment are starting to look leaden; government is promoting a host of innovation through specialist schools, city learning centres and city academies. With this very visible license to explore, some important and indicative new approaches are emerging, although arguably the exploration so far remains too conservative and staid for what will be needed.

Some clear vectors of change can be identified, the velocity of these changes vary and are varying, but these immediate term changes are already certain:

- the number of adults in the classroom is changing; classroom assistants, adults other than teachers, student teachers, older children (perhaps from another education phase), parent helpers, inspectors, advisers.
Classrooms are now a long way from one-teacher, one-group spaces;
- the length of the school day is changing, growing, with a mixture of curriculum need, curriculum crowding, parent employment, single parent families and much else moving schools toward pre-school and after school

provision;

- whole class teaching is firmly back as a desirable component in a portfolio of acceptable teaching techniques, but at the same time children at secondary age are moving less as deeper learning and more engaging tasks longer blocks of concentrated time. Children working with new media, for example, cannot pause and move every time the bells ring, both the task and the concentration required will need really substantial blocks of time;
- boundaries are softening: between schools, between countries, between phases, between the community and workplace learning. Families of schools and communities of learners are emerging; some of these have international rather than national members;
- diversity is actively encouraged: city academies, technology colleges, specialist schools, all through schools, denominational schools, community colleges and shared community learning assets, very large schools, tiny rural ones, LEA or foundation schools... and more;
- subject structures are being abandoned to allow properly cross curriculum, embedded learning. Having a discrete "technology" subject with a separate "biology" curriculum strand at a time of national shortage of bio-technologists is obviously foolish, for example;
- examinations and assessments are being developed locally to meet local economic and cultural needs. Perhaps the clearest trend - albeit a distant one - is towards collaborative endeavour with a softening of the rigid learning milestones that have previously punctuated our learning lives. Lifelong learning is a simple phrase, but the impact of university level learning, or vocational learning, moving down the age phase into schools and logged in learning accounts, or of school level work, as the curriculum broadens, moving into community learning, is clearly emerging as a driver of pedagogic and organisational change;
- a clearer sense of a global curriculum is emerging, with substantial initiatives to link schools across cultures and nations. At the same time a commoditisation of learning is becoming evident, particularly in the USA with "world" accreditation and provision (for example the European Computer Driving Licence ECDL, or Microsoft's own accreditation);
- participation rates are increasing - in pre-school, in post compulsory education within schools, in Higher Education, in corporate training and learning, in retirement. The proportion of PSB viewers who are also in a formal sense learners is rapidly increasing, driven by a mix of government targets, demographic change and economic imperative;
- new providers are appearing. UK universities do not have a track record of innovative teaching and learning (although they will need it to achieve their 50% participation rate targets) and one consequence is a host of corporate universities appearing, with the university of the third age and other initiatives like Learn Direct growing massively too.

For the BBC, the choices here seem stark, but straightforward: will the best course of action be to continue to

target current provision, for example GCSEs, producing the best possible support now for that which exists today (as GCSE Bitesize does) despite knowing that change is coming? Or is it better, whilst continuing with this work, to try to anticipate those coming changes and develop initiatives now that will soon support those new and emerging pedagogies, offering a longer design life for such work?

If only it were so simple; the problem with both courses of action is that they are relative passive, with the BBC servicing, rather than guiding or leading change. And change will need some serious guidance; around the world new pedagogies are moving in different directions and the jury is out on which will emerge victorious. There is a clear and absolute split, for example, between the countries or regions who are embracing "creativity and ingenuity", usually driven by the economic imperative of the growing their national income through the "new" economy (for example New Zealand, Finland, Singapore, Tasmania) and those for whom low taxation is the goal and who have thus who have embraced "productivity" in education. For them it is not the new things that technology can bring to learning but the opportunity it brings to do the old things cheaper, faster, with more pupils and so on. These "productivity" focussed countries (certainly including many USA states, some substantial regions in Europe, much of Russia) include some powerful opinion formers in world economic terms. Left alone it is not clear whether the UK will be drawn down the "creativity" or the "productivity" route and it will not be political decisions that make the choice. Rather, it will be large corporations and their commoditisation of learning (for example we already see the CISCO curriculum penetrating many FE colleges), with their substantial economies of scale, that determine which direction UK institutional learning might take.

Put bluntly, a proactive BBC is needed if learning is to move in a direction that the BBC's objectives and it's charter would recognise as appropriate. Neither a blind adherence to the existing learning model, nor waiting to see what else emerges will do; the BBC will need to be assertively proactive in moving the agenda forwards. A simple example is assessment. Much work within and outwith the BBC has offered testament to the power of rich media as a vehicle for children's learning; it engages, reduces disaffection, widens the "corridor of success", enriches the curriculum and promotes a wider, universally accepted definition of literacy. yet rich media based assessment remains full of complex problems about authenticity, quality, subjectivity, process and much else. The BBC should already have taken a lead here with innovative work to define strategies.

From the Charter, the BBC's derives a very clear commitment to UK values and culture. There is a very real possibility that through the adoption of a passive "support today, wait to see what tomorrow brings" policy for UK learning, the BBC might see UK values and culture in learning vanish within a generation with the BBC left to "service" the learning of a Disney Curriculum, or other global brands as they come to dominate UK learning.

Technological drivers

There have, of course, been constant promises of revolution in the technology that underpins PSB. Hyperbole has led, if anything to complacency as over-promised futures are followed but under-delivered realities. For example in Feb 2000, Lippman, writing for the American Center for Children and Media, wildly commented:

"Forget television. In three years, there won't be any. Internet broadcasting/multicasting can bring 250 million channels from around the world to any gizmo that tunes into the bit-flow. The TV receiver as a packaged product is as silly as a console HIFI."

but of course, here we are at 2004 and television receiver is still here, for now.

However, technology has given us a number of waves of major change: for example the growth of the motorcar in the 50s, desktop publishing from 1985 and the explosive growth of the mobile phone at the turn of the millennium. Each of these revolutions saw individuals empowered to do for themselves what before had been done for them: postscript and affordable laser printing, with desktop publishing applications, opened for everyone the ability to generate high quality print, without either prohibitive costs or editorial controls; although initial design left much to be desired, suddenly clubs, pubs, churches and individuals all did indeed become publishers. And the new technology has kept on coming, with photo quality colour printers down to £100 (from £5,500 for a postscript black and white one in 1985). Similarly, the internet and compression technologies wrought changes in the music industry which have telegraphed the growth of a viral, peer to peer, file exchanging world very clearly. Music provision has moved from dominant vertical suppliers (like EMI) through the centralised anarchy of Napster to the peer to peer and very personal worlds of Limewire, MP3 and iPods. What is significant is that individuals carry their choice, and their ability to vary and add to those choices, around with them, just as they carry their telephones. It already seems curious to phone a fixed line, screwed to a wall in someone's house on the off chance that they might be present and passing by. Similarly the fixed selection of tracks on a CD album has already started to feel like an imposition on personal, individual, choice.

With new and rich media, rather late in the day but nonetheless effectively, technology has finally begun to offer that same "everyone a publisher" symmetry to TV or cinema viewers. Broadcast quality cameras with triple CCDs have plummeted in price, high quality editing software like Final Cut Pro is a fraction of the price of Avid or Quantel hardware with "good enough" video editing software practically given away on consumers' computers. Computer hard disc space costs have been slashed, compression has transformed file sizes and networking speeds. And, if that was not enough, the mobile phone has begun to progress even more rapidly along the path pioneered earlier by computers. Megapixel phone cameras are the norm, the first 5 megapixel phone has launched in Korea and again compression technologies have brought third generation (3G) networking speeds that will effectively arm every phone user to be wannabe Kate Adies, live broadcasting watchable video back from the heart of the action.

Indeed, as Tony Ball commented in his 2003 MacTaggart Lecture:

"... for the price of a Georgian town-house in Edinburgh, anyone can launch a TV channel. Digital technology is doing for television production what the Apple Mac did for the publishing industry two decades ago."

But what is the role at this point for a central public broadcasting service? Will children send their video clips from their field trips or traffic surveys to the BBC? or simply post them to peers and other interested parties via their web-logs or wikis? 9/11 was an event where much of the initial content was provided by people for people, mediated by journalism. Individuals told of phone calls to their partners on board the crashing planes, or on the rooftop of the twin towers. Video was shot from office windows with handheld DV cameras, and this was all fed through a global news network. But it is likely, if such a dreadful event were to be repeated in 5 years or so, that those personal accounts would be found directly from Blogs or websites and a peer to peer journalism would have emerged. This will be as true for learning on PSB as it will be for journalism.

Historically the conduit of "broadcast and receive" has been staunchly asymmetrical: the BBC broadcasts, the viewers view. Today though, a few contributions to Blue Peter or Take Hart have become a larger flow of texts and

emails to News 24, or votes for ballroom dancing celebrities, or to Radio 5, but the eventual volume of contribution from these tools in learners' pockets or schoolbags simply cannot be supported by a hierarchical structure of editorial control. Of course, Desk Top Publishing didn't signal the death of traditional publishing with its quality assurance through literary editors' controls, but in most homes and schools and businesses high quality text is now originated locally and the proportion of textual material that comes through traditional, edited, quality publishing has diminished hugely. Should the BBC embrace a similar diminishing role? This report suggests not. Perhaps one error has been to assume that quality is a great vouchsafe of role. Tiny phone sized screen cannot, surely, supplant the 27" richly luminescent TV screen? But of course the TV revolution was built initially on a tiny 8" grey screen with awful luminosity and opaque images with no colour and little contrast. Phones already, with 65,536 or more colours and high resolution screens are a galaxy better than that.

In the 1980s a computer revolution was built on the simple old Acorn "BBC B" computer with 32k of RAM, a tiny palette of colours and nothing that even looked like a picture, let alone the video and 16.8 million colours of today's TFT active matrix flat computer screens. However, the BBC didn't shy away from the low resolution and poor palettes of the BBC micro and today, as learners embrace the "small screen" - in phones, in car seatbacks, in PDAs, the BBC should embrace them too with the same vigour. Invitations to viewers to txt in their thoughts alongside their emails is a mile short of the initiative that is needed.

And crucially, a big difference this time round is the potency of the peer to peer environment that technology has enabled. The natural role for a traditional BBC at the centre with its "Making of the Micro" series and "badged" computer does not exist in this peer to peer world, but what the role for the BBC might be, is a question that the BBC's future might depend on.

Political and social drivers

From 1870 onwards learning has been bonded, with greater or lesser tenacity, to the political system. The Secretary of State for Education is nowadays always a cabinet post and the last two elections were fought and won with a rallying cry of "Education, Education, Education". Around the world too, education is seen as a key driver of economic growth. As one of many, many examples the government of Singapore in 1997 launched their Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) framework. One of the four pillars of their framework is the emphasis on critical and creative thinking in schools. Specific changes made to encourage creativity included the teaching of thinking skills and the introduction of interdisciplinary and project work. The World Bank in 2003 ("[Lifelong Learning in the Global Knowledge Economy: Challenges for Developing Countries](#)", Ch 2. Transforming learning") contrasts a "traditional" model of learning with an "effective" model of lifelong learning where, for example: "People learn in groups and from each other." and this model is offered for political support to generate economic progress in developing countries. But the entry of learning, centre stage, into politics has come at a price; politics is also concerned with taxation levels. Promises don't come cheap. In California in 1999 incoming (and now disgraced) governor Gray Davis made improving Californian schools the top priority during his campaign. But with funding for public schools having fallen from 5th highest state (in the 60s) to 41st state in '99, he turned to more work (!) by pupils, teachers and parents to lead his revolution: "The purpose behind these bills is to ask more of teachers, students, principals, and parents" noting that " It took us 30 years to get in the mess we're in and we're not going to fix it in five years without a massive tax increase". It is this tension between ambition and the cost of achieving that ambition that is itself transforming education globally as public service education finds itself having to welcome in commercial providers. Commenting on the Australian situation in 2001, Kenway and Bullen (in "Consuming

Children. Education-entertainment-advertising", Buckingham: Open University Press) comment that:

"High ideals tend to fade away as State-provided finances decline and as the State 'encourages' closer partnerships between education and industry. Educationally sound and attractively packaged curriculum materials fill the hole in the resources budget of schools and offer technologically sophisticated 'solutions' to the pedagogical problems of overworked teachers. These pressures have created a conflict of interest between schools' mandate to educate, and their moral and ethical duties to protect children from exploitation by consumer culture. Corporations have recognized and taken advantage of this dilemma".

And here is a real concern for the BBC as this same significant movement of learning out of public service into a marketplace for learning and accreditation can be discerned in the UK too. It is most obvious where there are shortages, of course: computing, sport, the provision of new buildings all now see a substantial commercial interest as "normal" and it is not surprising that the BBC's role in learning (with the Digital Curriculum in particular) was most vigorously challenged by these fresh market providers of new learning technologies. Beyond state education, that "market" for learning is expanding rapidly in the family, workplace and community with substantial increases in activities such as short residential courses, study tours, fitness centres, sports clubs, nutrition and health texts, heritage centres, self-help therapy manuals, management gurus, electronic networks and self-instructional videos. Even cooking has become a learning industry. And it is no coincidence that these many new initiatives are focussed on the individual, indeed "personalised learning" has a fashionable political ring to it, born of repetition in policy and political rhetoric.

At the same time PSB in the UK is, perhaps not unreasonably, burdened with other political objectives too. Central to this is typically the role of PSB in building/preserving/broadening "UK Culture" so that the Peacock Commission could talk about "geographic universality", or Chris Smith could highlight the BBC's "acting as a cultural voice for the nation". Again, complexity clouds the simple terms of reference that PSB might derive from such clear political steers. In a world where technology has hugely diminished the significance of geographical location there is an debate to be explored about just where the BBC's learners might be located. It is not as simple as just saying that they are within the UK's national boundaries. the UK's school curriculum is in part legislated for in Europe (for example a steer towards better and earlier language teaching), examination boards are themselves international organisations with a global spread of examinees, whilst at higher education level Uk students study abroad in substantial numbers and overseas students study here in large numbers too. In a world where some other overseas curriculum wins a battle for market share that brings them UK learners the BBC's ability to deliver on its cultural political objective is severely diminished. But to head off that possibility would mean "taking on" global commercial providers and winning would inevitably leave the BBC with a hinterland far larger than the shores of the British Isles.

BBC's successes.. but also...

The BBC has a remarkable and honourable track record in supporting learners, both in their formal and informal learning, with a direct investment of some £142m in those two areas in 2003/04. The BBC's own submission to DCMS comments that:

"The BBC spends these licence fee revenues carefully to maximise their learning impact. We invest the vast majority to satisfy carefully identified audience needs, leaving a small proportion for leading-edge innovation. In

schools we undertake a full review of output each year to understand the evolving needs of teachers and students and the impact of our previous spending."

With a Digital Curriculum coming on-screen in 2006 and a vast array of programming, from the digital offerings of cBeebies and Skillswise to the web + broadcast integration of GCSE Bitesize, all the way to landmark series like The Big Read or The Human Mind, this is a portfolio that any PSB anywhere, with a learning remit, should be envious of. It isn't just about reach; GCSE Bitesize has provided a generation of secondary school students with the "insider information" that hitherto was the preserve only of a few (largely public) schools where staff had intimate knowledge of the subtleties and nuances of particular examinations. This has dramatically levelled the playing field and a significant part of the increased GCSE pass rates delivered on annually can be laid, with pride, at the BBC's door.

On-line the BBC Science site alone now hosts 2.5 million unique users over an average month, regardless of television programme support and doubtless a significant part of that on-line audience gained their first tentative steps through the BBC's WebWise internet "literacy" project.

However, is the story all about successes? Not everyone thinks so, David Liddiment, ITV Director of Channels in 2001 criticised the BBC for failing to deliver on its promise to be "an imaginative educator", Mark Thompson (in 2002 while at Channel 4) focussed on the need to take risks and to innovate with learning. But this is easy talk, much harder is to build the kind of pervasive, inclusive, quality success in the new worlds that learning and technology are offering and to do so in a way that offers a clear vision of why the charter and licence fees should continue. A central problem here is that, as Tony Ball (then Chief Executive at Sky TV) pointed out in 2003,

"public service broadcasting is, in economist-speak, a merit good. Like education, it is worth more to society than people would pay for it".

The problem of course that it is easy to demonstrate at an aggregate level that the BBC's portfolio of informal and formal learning support is indeed valuable to society. As technology leads us further towards a peer to peer world and learning moves towards personalised learning and learner communities, then supporting those will be far harder to evidence as socially desirable. Paradoxically however, it will be easier to demonstrate to the individual that the BBC is supporting "their" learning, and this telegraphs the danger for the BBC: those forces opposed to PSB will suggest that the BBC will have moved from being a merit good, individually focussed, to become just another commodity, with all that that implies for a loss of licence and the beginning of market pricing.

Learning reach and peer to peer learning

There have been significant attempts within the BBC to achieve a wider reach that extends into community initiatives and also across to hard to reach audiences utilising everything from buses to open learning centres. These are useful pilots, but with just 180,000 visitors to them all per year they are struggling to demonstrate the kind of scalability that will be needed for them to truly represent a change of direction for the BBC, however good their individual programmes of activity might be. But to a large extent they represent something of a "last millennium" thinking. They are still characterised by a sense of "providing" with the viewer "coming to" the BBC, albeit in more widely spread geographical locations, particularly with the buses. More excitingly in terms of where learning is heading would be initiatives like "People's War" which embraces the Culture Online philosophy of value-

adding contributions and reaches out to the more than 9 million people with wartime memories in the UK. Already over 20,000 contributions have been received and a real sense of symmetry is established, with an archive intended for use in schools and the community.

This philosophy of "by people, for people" is at the heart of the development of the opportunities for peer to peer learning that new peer to peer technologies have brought.

Some peer to peer learning is enabled through a centralised community. In some ways the BBC has already made strides in this field, and is a leader in its provision. It is manifested through BBC's website with its message boards, online chats and "*Have your say*". Rather than be passive consumers of information, or entertainment, the "audience" can contribute and participate in the debate and discussions through contribution to these online spaces. Individuals become learners and teachers, rather than just consuming listeners, viewers or readers. Here there is peer to peer interaction and learning through the mediation of a centralised resource. As Mark Thompson, director general of the BBC says:

"We look forward to a future where the public have access to a treasure house of digital content; a store of value which spans media and platforms, develops and grows over time, which the public own and can freely use in perpetuity... When the traditional one-way traffic from broadcaster to consumer evolves into a true creative dialogue in which the public are not passive audiences but active, inspired participants."

But for those peer-to-peer communities to become properly self regenerative in content terms, far more resources need to be focussed on the facilitation of these communities in a way that has been seen to be extraordinarily powerful. For example: the DfES Talking Heads community of practice for 21,000 headteachers; the Wikipedia project (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>); or the BBC's own h2g2 project (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/h2g2/>) are all indicative of this centrally stored locally sourced model of learning. Both have a model of sharing content / wisdom between individuals, but both are augmented by discussion and interaction between people too in forums and chat spaces. These 'open content' encyclopedias may be the forerunners of 'open content documentaries' with the media-rich contributions that pocketable new technologies will bring. Tools that allow the construction of narratives through these contributions might result in "documentaries that are no longer linear and broadcast. Viewers, readers, authors, participants (and the vocabulary here is difficult) could select from threads and paths that matched their needs and their ability to engage.

At the other end of the continuum lies the totally peer to peer communities. Individuals establish online presence, with content, forums etc. Others tap into these communities building a matrix of personalised links and generating content through contribution and annotation. Establishing a role for PSB in such a world is complex, but might include that of identity verifier, or manager of the verification process – some kind of benchmarking and quality assurance procedure.

An earlier, 2000, Ultralab project with Channel 4 explored a network of people and their profiles that enabled learners to find others with relevant skills, interests and resources through links with an augmented network – to find people through recommendations and contacts of others.

<http://improbability.ultralab.net/plan4life/01contents.html>

There is a clear sense in learning that these peer to peer opportunities are accelerating away from the BBC rather

than of the BBC itself accelerating in an attempt to overtake them and to harness the potential that they offer.

Gaping holes

Although the rhetoric of ICT's impact on learning is a story well told, the reality reveals that some significant barriers have stood in the way of the potential rate of progress. Of course rich media has been more seductive for learners, of course the Internet has changed perceptions so that we emphasize knowing how to learn even above learning, of course a wider definition of literacy has proved to be more inclusive and so on. But some significant barriers remain. Foremost of these, and little commented on elsewhere, is the whole issue of identity which continuously emerges as a huge barrier to learners. It doesn't matter whether we are exploring learner portfolios, building communities of practice, joining schools together in shared projects, verifying the examinee in assessments, building progression between institutions (in parallel or series) or just being confident about who can (or can't) see the draft a learner is developing, the problem of an audit trail of identity comes up over and over. The politics of this would suggest that tackling identity on its own would be difficult, but solving the problem as part of something else, would be very achievable.

Of course similar problems occur with e-commerce and a host of competing commercial initiatives are seeking to dominate that space from Microsoft's Passport or AOL's ScreenName across to the open source community's Liberty Alliance. Various explorations at UK government level have spluttered and then foundered: the Millennium Mail (one email for each learner) promise by the Blair government, the link between identity cards and other government agencies (now withdrawn) and so on. But the robust, trustworthy provision of a learner identity remains elusive and unsolved for the UK. It is difficult, when lists are drawn up of who might be trusted enough and large enough to solve this problem, not to come back over and over to the BBC and this arguably is central function of PSB learning provision in this new millennium.

Another gap is in the accreditation of creative outcomes and processes. Not providing courses; that should be the province of others, but building the accreditation framework that ensues those many courses head in the right direction. Around the world, UK included, there is a clear view that creativity is a desired outcome from national learning policies. But the assessment and accreditation of that creative learning is poorly served, if at all. A powerful example of what may be possible is evidenced by the International Certificate of Digital Creativity (ICDC) research project between partners Ultralab, the Arts Council and Creative Partnerships., which flags creativity centrally as an assessed output, embraces new media, but requires both collaboration and a final public exhibition. The pilot project is under siege from prospective schools who want it "right now" as a way to accredit their learners creativity at all ages. Again, when lists are drawn up of who might be trusted enough and large enough to "own" this creativity space in learning, the BBC stands out as probably the only trusted provider. The link between the BBC's own professionalism, together with a possible broadcast home for some of the exhibitions, with something like the ICDC, makes a very powerful match. As an instrument to offer a very clear link between the BBC's national PSB remit and its need to support an increasingly personalised, changing, world of learning, whilst seizing a global initiative, it is hard to think of anything more effective.

Closing those two enormous gaps - identity and the assessment of creativity - which both stand as a real impediment to new learning, would be a very effective way of seizing the initiative proactively in a way that this report suggest that the BBC must do.

So ... where shall the BBC go? What shall the BBC do?

Fundamentally this report recommends three clear general directions for substantial action and specifies some appropriate projects that would help the corporation embark on those courses of action:

1) shaping the learning future:

As discussed above, the BBC needs to be proactive in shaping and making a learning futures for all learners in the UK, rather than waiting and then supporting whatever direction that learning future takes in a reactive way. It is very clear that the big issues are centred on assessment and accreditation, on the shape and breadth of the curriculum (and especially it's refocus on processes like thinking skills, collaboration, creativity), on the continued professional development of teachers and other adults central to the learning process (young parents for example, and sports coaches), on the application of research insights into the way we learn, on the organisation of learning and on the meta level reflection of their own learning by learners themselves.

The BBC can't achieve all this alone, nor should it. If the UK's learning is to be effectively refocussed, like much of the world, on creativity, agility, ingenuity, and collaboration then it may well prove most effective to begin that change outside of the institutions that historically have been slowest and most reluctant to change. The BBC can, and must, be that proactive catalyst for change.

This will require a more global remit for the BBC's learning policy because UK learners are in a global learning environment. The unthinkable alternative is that sooner or later the BBC will be left supporting a commoditised curriculum espousing other cultural values and thus failing substantially on its charter remit. Learning is becoming, indeed has already become, a global activity and there is no place for domestic endeavour by the BBC if UK culture is to survive the assault of this globalisation. The BBC either becomes a global learning brand with a brand value of quality, creativity, innovation and public service, or it embraces a future servicing other global brands. There isn't a halfway house.

One obvious way to kick-start this whole "reinvention" process is to commission a major series exploring radical learning worldwide, looking at what is happening, and what is failing, everywhere; contrasting what we know with what we actually do (for example we know that mixed age learning works - and people see it working every day in the workplace, in sports clubs, in scout groups, in orchestras... but what we do is to still group children because they are born between two Septembers). Similarly a look at some of the radical experiments in school design around the world are fascinating, but provoking: all through schools, tiny schools, vast industrial scale ones, schools with a design life of three years or a century, schools without year structures or subject structures, schools with radical approaches to gender.... and an exploration of different assessment strategies, or a visit explore Tasmania's remarkable Essential Learnings curriculum... and so on.

The starting point should be to establish a national "uncertainty" about current provision, not critically so but inquisitively, and to then feed it with a habit of reflective practice - for example children and parents all across the UK trying learning with different predetermined aural / music environments during a fixed homework task for example (in the style of "Test the Nation"). Of course, the right activities (see below) could themselves start this debate running.

In short: sow a seed of uncertainty and doubt about current provision and engage in project activities that help to define radical alternatives. There is no "fixed" future, only a habit of questioning and enquiry about what the future might be. That habit needs to start now and the BBC should lead it.

2) **seizing the technology initiative:**

Back in the early 1980s it was clear that the personal computer revolution was significant and could involve a substantial proportion of the nation, not just in schools but at home too, as well as in the workplace. A quarter of a century on from then, the mobile phone revolution has demonstrated a huge penetration with individual ownership levels, especially amongst learners, nearing saturation. National ownership of mobile phones for secondary school age students is in excess of 80% in some regions for example, way above the levels of personal computer ownership even in the heady days of Sinclair Spectrums and BBC Bs.

There are a couple of really significant anniversaries coming up that might provide a hook to hang a substantial national focus on the new peer to peer world of learning technologies, especially mobile phones. The BBC Micro will be 25 years old in 2006 (or the same year is 20 years from its discontinuation). But November 1986 heralded the BBC's Domesday project with mass contributions and this, surely is the most appropriate opportunity to engage the whole nation in a peer to peer exchange of a scale never seen before, but perhaps this time without a central "collecting function" so that it is genuinely peer to peer in nature. It should not replicate the Domesday Project although a clear target must be to exceed both its participation rates and its availability. This time round contribution and participation needs to be accredited and might offer the jumpstart that the BBC's foray into the accreditation of creativity might need.

The BBC needs to be far more aggressive in exploring and developing the possibilities of new learning technologies. To prevent this from being simply a headlong dash into geekdom a clear philosophy of learning needs to be enunciated and used as a litmus test of the appropriateness of each innovation. A suggested philosophy will be appended to the final version after this draft, but the provision of a national learner identity must surely be at the heart of the new learning technology project (see **Gaping holes** above).

3) **Accreditation**

If the predictions of a commoditisation of learning are accurate, and thus far they look predictably on course for being so, then the BBC needs to think clearly about its own brand as an agent of accreditation and in doing so could very effectively help to move forward on (1) above. Accreditation is discussed above (under **Gaping holes**) in detail, but it is worth finally observing that by seizing the ground that is the accreditation of creativity, with its excellent fit to the BBC's values and professionalism, it is likely that the issue of identity would be solved on the way (the BBC will need to know with certainty who the creative and accredited learners are) and it would not be hard to kickstart the whole creativity accreditation drive with a national focus / activity that would deliver on (1) above too. Accreditation, and the strengthened BBC brand in creativity that results, is the key that unlocks so much of what needs to be done, that it makes a very attractive focus.

It will be seen that this document is not, cannot, be recommending a menu of choices. What is recommended here in 1 - 3 above is a single entity, a recipe for the BBC's survival and future.

In all this of course the BBC must engage with DfES and other stakeholders about future rather than current needs.

Not in a dialogue of commissioner / service supplier (where the BBC is the latter) but in a shared dialogue of co-research and shared exploration. There is a significant degree to which the BBC will need to lead rather than follow opinion. Focus groups will not help here.

And finally, rather worryingly...

A host of institutions that were provided and resourced at a national level have, over the years, found that, once technology allowed alternatives, that individual or community choice eventually came to replace their national provision with an alternative more closely tailored to the individual and diverse needs of their formerly loyal clientele. Libraries, the railways, increasingly the Post Office, perhaps BT all offer worrying examples through history:

The railway network, which was unified and standardised in the name of efficiency, thought it knew both what journeys people wanted to make and the destinations that they needed. In practice new technology, specifically increasingly efficient and affordable motor cars, gave people an alternative which not only met the needs of travellers better, but also allowed them to define new and exciting behaviours for their travel and leisure that could not have been supported by a rail network. Today many families and individuals arrange their transport through a mix of personal provision and small group arrangements (the "school run" shared car for example) and railways have become largely irrelevant for all but those with no viable alternative (for example commuters) who place a capacity burden on the network that hurts rather than helps.

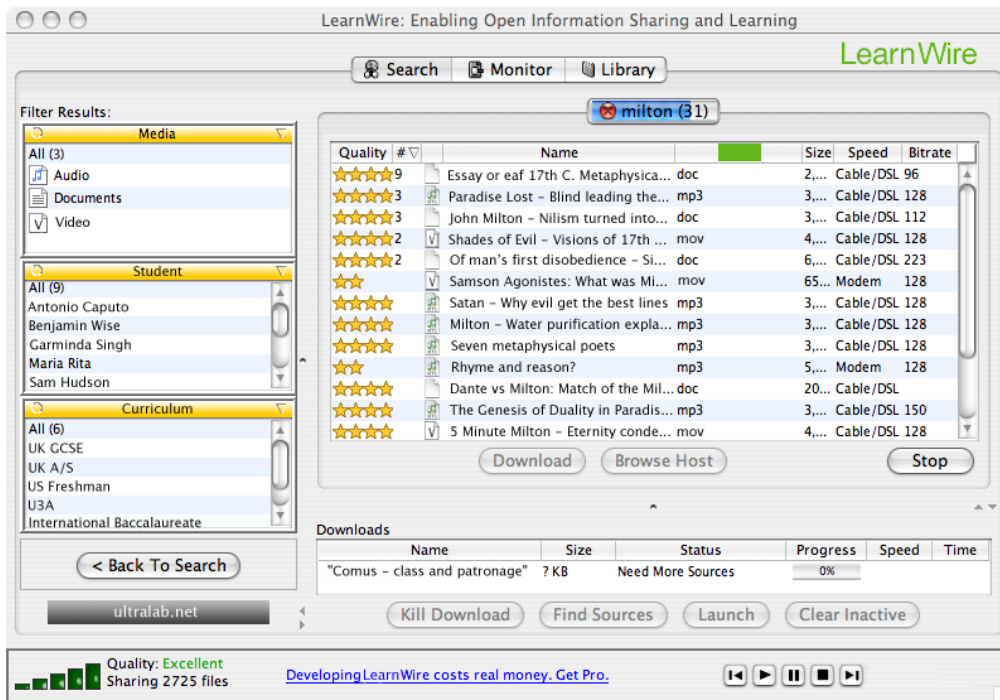
At this stage it is clear that neither the BBC nor indeed schools themselves have an automatic right to survive. Enormous numbers of children have very poor experiences in schools - bullying, lack of ambition, over regulation, more failure than success, lack (and closure) of a local rural schools (c.f. Beeching?!), even toilets make a less than seductive learning experience. It is clear that new technology is beginning to offer some powerful alternatives - over one million children are now home educated in the US for example.

Whether those school alternatives come from individuals building their own provision, or from solutions in the viral, peer to peer way that we have seen technology enable elsewhere, or whether this is the beginning of a commoditisation of learning schools' survival at this stage is far from certain. What is certain is that these expanding alternatives do not vouchsafe the future of the school as an institution.

The BBC too is facing a radical assault from alternatives rather than competitors. Computers have brought engaging new media authoring and exchange environments into the home and falling prices have included many in this revolution. The parallels with railways are strong; the BBC could so easily find that its vigorously defended standards, its central editorial control, its provision of learning for institutions rather than for learners (what Bite Size supports above all else is, of course, the examination not the individual) may simply fade gently in significance in most peoples' lives, to become in new media terms tomorrow what the railways have become in transport terms today. A genuinely tough question is whether the BBC's processes, structures, will, and in deed raw agility can be enough to make the necessary changes. All the dramatic technology changes, from the car to the mobile phone have been, in the end, about personal freedoms and in each case individuals have invested to gain those personal freedoms. The BBC is not well placed, structurally or philosophically to deliver those freedoms either in learning or

in broadcasting. It will need to be.

If you believe in schools with a UK culture of learning, and if you believe in the BBC, (as the authors of this report do), then it is clear that neither can sit back and wait to see what tomorrow might bring; the risks are too great. They need each other and they need to share a proactive attempt to demonstrate that the extraordinary advances new technology will continue to bring have allowed them both to transform in a way that really does meet the emerging needs of learners and other stakeholders.



Perhaps this (above) is the future of public service learning?!